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How Paul Became the Straight Word: Protestant Biblicism and the Twentieth-Century Invention of Biblical Heteronormativity

Heather R. White

When conservative Christians argue that their Bibles tell them that homosexuality is immoral, they are not wrong. Most contemporary Bibles—and especially the most popular versions—do quite clearly *say* that homosexuality is sinful. As evidence, we might take a look at the *Life Application Bible* (2011), a bestseller in the category called the study Bible. In its pages are everything a reader needs in order to make sense of the compendium of ancient texts that make up what Christians call the Old and New Testaments. There is also an index. Between *home* and *honesty* is the entry for homosexuality. Under the subheading “scripture forbids it,” the entry lists Rom 1:26–27, 1 Cor 6:9, and 1 Tim 1:10. Readers who turn to these passages find not only the words of Scripture but also expanded commentary, which adds a pointed clarification: “the Bible specifically calls homosexual behavior a sin” (1572, 1916). There are, of course, Christians who reject this antihomosexual interpretation. They call these same passages the “clobber texts” for the way they are used to demean gay men and lesbians (Goss and West 2000, 79). But little evidence of a debate appears in the pages of the *Life Application Bible*. This Bible’s user-friendly format guides readers unerringly toward a simple, uncontested truth, and it offers engaging moments to reflect, at every step, on what this truth means personally. Readers are left with little question: God has a fulfilling plan for your life. That plan is heterosexuality.

This essay traces how an ancient truth of antihomosexual condemnation came to be implanted in American Bibles and lodged—in particular—in the

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epistles of the apostle Paul. The Pauline texts of Romans and 1 Corinthians are the most frequently cited prooftexts for biblical condemnation of homosexuality. The same-sex meanings of these passages are often not perceived as interpretations; they are imputed to the text and its historical context as the timeless, original meaning. Viewed historically, however, there are many things that are puzzlingly new about this plain biblical speech. The newer Bibles' sharply cast antihomosexual tradition is at best an ambiguous shadow in older Bibles. The seventeenth-century King James translation offers no such clearly articulated set of prohibitions directed at same-sex behavior. The older Bibles are missing not only the modern pedagogical apparatus of indices and expository notes; they also lack the foundational wording and cross-referenced textual tradition. Even more confounding, the sodomites of the King James Version are puzzlingly out of place: they appear in the Old Testament books of the Deuteronomistic History. These archaic pages not only lack Paul's didactic antihomosexual writings; they also speak of a jarringly different sodomitical past.

Paradoxically, it was Protestants' faith in the Bible's timelessness and enduring relevance that served as a key mechanism for these textual changes. As Brian Malley explains in his ethnographic study of Protestant biblicism, a key aim of Protestant Bible reading is to "establish transitivity between the text and beliefs." On its own terms, the practice of anchoring beliefs in the Bible is a guard against the vagaries of cultural change. But in practice, as Malley (2004, 19) observes, "the interpretive tradition mobilizes hermeneutic imaginations anew." Protestant biblicism thus does in practice precisely what it opposes in theory: it generates new meanings for biblical texts. The tradition and the past—"what the Bible *said*"—are continuously reinvented through the current encounter with "what the Bible *says*." Over the course of the twentieth century, these practices of Protestant biblicism have generated much more than new interpretations. They also had a material influence on the formatting and content of the burgeoning consumer market of mass-produced Bibles. Thus as American Protestants turned to their Bibles for timeless truths, they unwittingly effected a twinned sexual and textual transformation. Their quest for timeless meaning facilitated the reshaping of a King James Sodom tradition into a twentieth-century antihomosexuality tradition, and it authorized and naturalized new sexual paradigms by locating them—via the Bible—in the ancient past.

Twentieth-century English-language Bible translations and interpretive commentaries, that is, exhibit the increasing influence of modern

medical constructions of a sexual binary—a distinct and opposing relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality (Katz 1997). Historians of sexuality show how these medical constructions of the sexual binary shaped institutions of law and policy to form what historian Margot Canaday (2009) calls “the straight state.” This essay traces the making of what we might call “the straight Word.” Looking at American Bibles shows that religion has played an active part in these developments in sexuality, as practices of Christian interpretation molded new interpretive traditions into seemingly unchanging Scriptures. This essay illustrates these changes by working through the texts and associated commentaries for three major translation projects: the seventeenth-century translation of the King James Version (KJV), the mid-twentieth-century Revised Standard Version (RSV), and the 1978 translation of the New International Version (NIV). This history of Christians changing Bibles shows how Paul became the modern authority for a new doctrine of Christian heteronormativity, and it also shows how Protestant Bible-reading practices helped to authorize and naturalize twentieth-century innovations in sexuality.

The Homo/Hetero-Sexual Binary

Scholarship on the history of sexuality presents as axiomatic a view of bodies, pleasures, and relationships as socially and historically contingent. A famous passage from Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* serves as exhibit A for this scholarly approach:

Sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood.... The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (1990, 43)

Here Foucault gives a descriptive account of the nineteenth-century emergence of sexology, a specialized subfield of psychology and psychiatry that he identifies as the metaphorical inventors of this “personage” of the homosexual. These new doctors generated a medical lexicon for human sexuality with the stated aim of replacing moralizing approaches to “forbidden acts” with scientific inquiries into causes and possible cures (White 2015, 21).

This famous passage from Foucault is often cited as evidence for a historical shift “from act to identity” (Jagose 1996, 10). The explanation goes

like this: earlier taboos against sodomy condemned same-sex *behavior*, which modern medicine reconfigured as an interior *condition*. The medical categorization helped to unwittingly lay the foundation for politicized gay identity. The medical invention of the homosexual, that is, marked a shift away from a conception of sodomy as voluntary act to a new notion of homosexuality as durable identity.

Broader work in the history of sexuality, however, shows that the changes brought by the late nineteenth-century medical framework were not merely a shift from act to identity. The medical approach to sexuality also offered new ways of classifying and evaluating behavior. Over time, this process worked to normalize previously “unnatural” and “sodomitical” activity between men and women by mapping it onto a new interpretive grid. Thus a practice such as oral sex became normal as it came to be defined by the participants’ genders rather than the act itself (Halley 1993). These changes also placed new scrutiny on formerly innocent expressions of same-sex affection. The terms homosexual and heterosexual appeared first in medical textbooks and gradually percolated outward as the therapeutic paradigm and its grounding in health and wellness entered mainstream awareness. In the decade after World War II, popularly dubbed the Age of Psychology, everyday Americans imbibed new ideas about heterosexual normalcy and homosexual perversion through popular reading. Lifestyle magazines gave advice about gender-appropriate sex education, and newspapers reported on purges of perceived sex deviates from federal employment. The pervasive message about sexual health was that it was vitally important—key to personal and social happiness—and also frighteningly fragile. Heterosexuality needed defending from the subtle invasion of homosexual perversion (Muravchik 2011; White 2015).

The contagion aspects of this medical framework for sexuality was challenged in later decades, but these challenges also inadvertently stabilized and naturalized the hetero/homo binary. In the 1970s, gay activists successfully challenged the disease classification and helped to establish homosexuality as a neutral aspect of human personality rather than a perverted version of heterosexuality that needed to be treated and cured. These interventions helped to right the lopsidedness of the sexual binary, producing a parallel framework for gay and straight as neutral and inborn sexual orientations (Bayer 1981). At the same time, these efforts also had the paradoxical effect of naturalizing heterosexuality. Heterosexual and homosexual came to embody more than stated sexual identity; they oper-

ated as descriptive terms for broadly classifying human social and erotic behavior. The modern sexual system thus not only constructed sexuality as an interior attribute of the self, but it also provided new typologies for classifying extrinsic social behavior.

The classificatory typologies of the modern sexual system are perhaps the most durably embedded parts of this system of knowledge, because they seem to operate descriptively rather than ideologically. Queer theorist David Halperin (2000) examines how these descriptive indicators have been used to find same-sex sexuality in history. Halperin's focus is on behavior and its perceived meaning; he investigates the broad range of historical and contextual meanings for attributes often perceived to signify homosexuality. Halperin argues that many seemingly gay characteristics have at many points in history marked typical—even aspirational—qualities of manliness. Halperin deploys the past as a queering mechanism: the strangeness of history helps to dissolve the fictive unity of modern sexual identities and reveal the “incoherence at the core of the modern notion of homosexuality” (90–91).

This essay adopts a version of Halperin's method, using Bible translations (and accompanying commentaries) as the queering device to dissolve the fictive unity of modern biblical heteronormativity. Whereas Halperin investigated the premodern cultural signification of ostensibly homosexual behavior, this essay searches for the earlier interpretive histories of Scripture and commentary about homosexuality. This body of outdated and seemingly irrelevant biblical commentary, especially as it appears in tertiary reference tools, has been largely overlooked in the contemporary scholarly discussion about the historical meaning of 1 Cor 6:9 and Rom 1:26–27, the go-to passages on homosexuality. Most biblical scholarship on these passages bypasses historical interpretation—and especially the interpretation directed at everyday Christians. The focus of this literature is instead the original languages and ancient historical contexts. While this approach may uncover new knowledge about ancient contexts, a direct dive into the primary sources also risks the beguiling mirror of a desired past. There is nothing more seductive—or more Protestant—than this desire for unmediated access to the text's so-called original meaning. An inquiry into the history of interpretation helps to mediate against this false sense of textual intimacy.

First, a caution: old Bible dictionaries are like outdated time machines. Each one of these contraptions promises to transport the reader into the mind and context of the historical author. Exploring these alternative

pasts in sequence, however, jarringly unsettles their respective claims to timelessness. Each disparate past was generated in its time by an author convinced his insight gave us access to the true original. The discordant originals help to make visible the naturalizing operations of Protestant biblicism.

Other Sodomites

The first time machine: a Bible dictionary from 1929. *Homosexuality* is nowhere to be found in this reference work. The first Bible dictionary entries for this medical neologism did not appear until the 1960s (Baab 1962, 639). What do appear are entries for *Sodom* and, under that, *sodomite*. Definitions acknowledge a link between these terms: the former is a city referenced in various passages throughout the Old and New Testaments, most famously in Gen 19, which recounts the city's destruction by God as punishment for the sin of its denizens. Those denizens are the eponym for later namesakes: "sodomites" were guilty of "a loathsome vice" that "owes its name to their behavior" (Eiselen, Lewis, and Downey 1929, 232). Circling tautologically through city, sin, and denizens—these entries defined each term in reference to the others. A cross-listed biblical passage—Ezek 16—promised substance: this sin of Sodom, committed by sodomites, and thus bearing their name, is "defined as arrogant prosperity and callousness" (724). Another widely used early twentieth-century reference elaborated that *sodomite* was an English word translated from the Hebrew *keddešim*, which designated persons guilty of "not ordinary immorality but *religious prostitution*, i.e., immorality practiced in the worship of a deity and in the immediate precincts of a temple" (Selbie 1902). Cross-listed passages point the reader to five Old Testament passages that reference these sodomites: one in Deuteronomy, three in 1 Kings, and one in 2 Kings. Similar definitions prevailed in other popular Bible reference materials (Barnes 1900; Orr 1915; Davis 1917).¹

1. Deut 23:17: "There shall be no whore of the daughters of Israel, nor a sodomite of the sons of Israel." 1 Kgs 14:24: "And there were also sodomites in the land: *and* they did according to all the abominations of the nations which the LORD cast out before the children of Israel." 1 Kgs 15:12: "And he took away the sodomites out of the land, and removed all the idols that his fathers had made." 1 Kgs 22:46: "And the remnant of the sodomites, which remained in the days of his father Asa, he took out of the land." 2 Kgs 23:7: "And he brake down the houses of the sodomites, that *were* by the house of

First, we must notice the absences. The so-called clobber passages are not there. Not one of the Bible dictionary entries on sodomites points readers to a passage in the Pauline epistles or even in the New Testament. Homosexuality—or same-sex sexuality—is at best hinted at as a “loathsome vice,” but other parts of the definition directly name other meanings—namely, arrogant prosperity or religious prostitution. The latter definition distanced sodomy from ordinary sexual immorality. Sodomy, in these definitions, was a perverse ritual practice.

The Bible translation to which these reference tools referred was the KJV. For American Protestants, as for the rest of the English-speaking Protestant world, this Bible was no mere translation. The KJV stood unrivaled for more than four centuries as *the* Bible (Noll 2011; Marks 2012). Published in 1611, the KJV was a product of the English Reformation, and this context gave rise to particular visions of Sodom.

Historian Harry G. Cocks (2017, 158) shows how the Reformers read the story of Sodom as a sacred history of the Reformation fight against the “Whoredom and Uncleaness” of Roman Catholicism. In this theological polemic, the biblical sodomites were perverse papists, and the city of Sodom was the Roman Church. Homoeroticism was a component part of these biblical and theological narratives, but same-sex perversion was only one thread in a nest of bodily perversions signified by Sodom, which also encompassed fornication, adultery, prostitution, gender inversion, and subhuman monstrosity. These forms of sexual, gender, and bodily deviance further tangled with religious difference. Roman Catholicism was at the center of this thicket, as the paradigmatic prototype of the illicit heathenism found in false religion (133–60).

American Protestants, as inheritors of the Reformation legacy and its English Bible, also narrated their encounters with religious and bodily difference through the biblical story of Sodom. This pairing of Sodom and perverse idolatry was an interpretive tradition that continued to hold

the LORD, where the women wove hangings for the grove.” (A sixth passage, Job 36:14, contains the same original Hebrew word, but the KJV renders it “the unclean”: “They die in youth, and their life *is* among the unclean.”) None of these five passages appear in contemporary Bible dictionary references to homosexuality, and later translations substitute “cult prostitutes” (or a similar phrase) for “sodomites” in these verses. Several contemporary scholars challenge the sexualized meaning of the word as an interpretive gloss and argue that the English rendering should simply be “holy man.” For a history of interpretation, see Budin 2008 and Lings 2013.

power through the early twentieth century. Indeed, the Bible dictionaries and commentaries cited at the beginning of this essay section appeared in writing by Protestant domestic missionaries in the 1920s. Herbert Welsh, an Episcopalian missionary to Pueblo nations of the American southwest, referenced definitions of sodomy as an immoral pagan rite in order to argue—speciously—that Pueblo dance ceremonies “resembled this ancient religion practiced by the people of Sodom and Gomorrah” (quoted in Wenger 2009, 218–19). Welsh was no wacky outlier: quite a number of religion scholars viewed the so-called primitive religion of pre-Israelite cultures as naturally similar to non-Western spiritual practice. The entry for *sodomy* in James Hasting’s widely used *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* was written by such a scholar: George Aaron Barton, professor of Semitic languages and history of religion at the University of Pennsylvania and seminal thinker in the field of Oriental studies (Speiser and Albright 1942). Barton surmised that biblical sodomites were practitioners of religiously based sex rituals, comparable to the reported “indecentcies” practiced within Saivite sects of Hinduism and in the coming-of-age rituals of Australian aboriginal people (Barton 1921, 673). These interpretations of the biblical Sodom located sodomitical perversion on the bodies of religious and racialized Others.

These exotic constructions of sodomy tended to exempt from scrutiny the homoerotic affections of those within the Protestant fold—particularly when these believers were white Europeans. Historians’ investigations of seventeenth-century sodomy discourses underscore this distancing effect: the associations of sodomy with a broader social disorder had the effect of removing everyday homoerotic affection from the fearsome condemnations of sodomitical sin (Herrup 1999; Bray 2006). Historians of sexuality in the United States also argue that other dynamics of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American Protestantism contributed to a lack of concern about homoerotic behavior. Protestant practice focused on various worrisome aspects of relationships between women and men, which included not only attention to the marriage but also the more concerning task of preventing temptation between women and men. Same-sex friendships and single-sex institutions, in contrast, provided safe havens from sexual danger. In practice, these social and religious configurations meant that institutions like the Young Men’s and Young Women’s Christian Associations, with American branches founded in 1851 and 1858 respectively, provided surprising latitude to homoerotic relationships between women and between men

(Gustav-Wrathall 1998; Chauncey 1985). Historian Kathi Kern (2018, 18), examining the amorous same-sex friendships of one YWCA leader, argued that religion in this context offered “vocabularies of spiritual intimacy, religiously affiliated homosocial spaces, intimate rituals, and powerful theological concepts that transcended stigmas of deviance.” For those within the spiritual fold, these religious spaces could nurture relationships of same-sex desire not in spite of theological commitments but because of them.

Homosexuality Comes Home to Roost

By the 1940s, as new frameworks of sexual health began to circulate in the American vernacular, same-sex love could no longer claim unexamined innocence. In 1946, for the first time, Christians could open a Bible and find a reference to homosexuality in its pages. This Bible was the New Testament of the RSV; the complete translation with the Old Testament came out in 1952. The American Standard Bible Committee, the group of biblical scholars that labored over this translation, began their work in the late 1930s. As Protestant liberals educated in elite intuitions, they were likely well acquainted with the fields of psychology and psychotherapy. In many ways, the RSV translation was the product of liberal Protestant commitments to glean insight from new historical and scientific research as a resource for Christian revelation. The RSV was advertised as the “first modern Bible”; it promised to match the “timeless beauty” of the KJV but with “more accurate and easier to read prose” (RSV advertisement 1952; Thuesen 1999). The new direct reference to homosexuality dovetailed with the translators’ mission to replace the KJV’s vague anachronisms with modern, accessible wording.

The Bible passage was 1 Cor 6:9, where homosexuals were now listed among the sinners barred from the kingdom of God. This change streamlined into one figure what the KJV listed in two words: “effeminate” and “abusers of self with mankind.” The new wording received little notice, but various authors discussed how the new translation challenged previous assumptions about what kinds of sins were being addressed by the KJV’s vague wording. One local pastor reminisced about a favorite sermon that expanded on the figure of the “effeminate” in 1 Cor 6:9. The minister understood the term as an obvious reference to “the soft, the pliable, those who take the easy road.” The sermon’s message was a challenge to undertake the difficult path of faith. This minister reported “his amazement and

chagrin” when he read the same passage in the RSV and discovered that “effeminate” was translated “homosexuals” (Jones 1956, 77). The point of this anecdote was to warn other ministers to use updated reference tools in their sermon preparation. The outdated source for this sermon may well have been the 1929 *Abington Bible Commentary*, which expanded on the apostle Paul’s concerns about “self indulgence of appetite and speech” (Eiselen 1929, 1178). This earlier understanding of effeminacy was not the only nonhomosexual interpretation of the sinners named in this passage. Another widely shared assumption about the reference to “abusers of self with mankind” was that it prohibited masturbation (“self-abuse”) or any other kind of nonprocreative “spilling of seed,” such as the use of birth control (Fletcher 1960, 118; Northcote 1906, 34). The RSV’s unambiguous reference to “homosexuals” in this passage foreclosed these earlier interpretations with the simple insertion of a new word.

The new wording of 1 Cor 6:9 was only one part of a broader reconfiguration, which shuffled the KJV-based Sodom tradition into a new interpretive tradition that focused on homosexuality as a distinct category of deviance. These changes are exhibited with particular clarity in the twelve-volume *The Interpreter’s Bible: The Holy Scriptures in the King James and Revised Standard Versions*, published by the theologically moderate Abingdon Press. Careful perusal of these twelve hefty volumes promised to open up timeless truths that transcended the time-bound translations of the KJV and RSV. This magisterial reference tool, in sum, built an accessible door for modern-day Bible readers to glean timeless truth from ancient texts. Even the editors marveled: this new commentary, the introduction promised, offered a “veritable ‘open sesame’” to the world of the Bible (Buttrick 1951, xvii). This paradox of ancient truth and modern relevance also suffused the volume’s newly frank discussion of homosexuality. The direct speech about homosexuality was a first for Bible reference tools. As the scholarly authors addressed it, this modern innovation was truth always present in the original texts.

The primary textual anchors for this new antihomosexual Bible tradition were in 1 Cor 6:9 and Rom 1, with Old Testament support found in Leviticus and in the Gen 19 story of Sodom. The *Interpreter’s Bible* explained the same-sex meaning of these passages with language that evoked psychoanalysis. Commentary on Rom 1:26–28 explained that homosexuality was a “manifestation” of “the root cause of both the sin and corruption in idolatry,” phrasing that followed disease diagnosis of homosexuality as the behavioral manifestation of a deeply rooted pathol-

ogy (1954, 401–3). The biblical commentary also stressed the contagious aspects of this sexual pathology: those who “refuse to give God any place in their thoughts,” this same commentator warned, might also be abandoned to corrupt desires (471).

The entry of new homosexual meanings into these Bible verses took place alongside the sodomite’s exit. In five Old Testament passages where the KJV spoke of “sodomites,” the RSV now named “cult prostitutes.” The change in term offered what translators and commentators alike saw as not an innovation but a clarification. Biblical scholarship widely insisted that the term sodomites in the passage was misleading and inaccurate. While mid-twentieth-century scholars continued to interpret these as references to sex acts linked to pagan rituals, most of the biblical scholarship theorized that these practices were part of an ancient fertility cult, in which sexual intercourse was linked to the deities’ power over the propagation of life (Brooms 1941). This interpretation would seem to necessarily exclude homosexuality. As one scholar pointedly argued, “homosexual coitus would be meaningless in the ritual of a fertility cult” (Bailey 1955, 53). These textual changes, as mere translations, made no claim to innovation. But they were shaped by a new common sense: heterosexuals could not possibly be sodomites.

The new homosexuality tradition was thus centered on a different set of passages than the earlier Sodom tradition. The Old Testament sodomites and their pagan idolatry were now replaced by a new therapeutic orthodoxy that focused on the New Testament. At the center of this anti-homosexuality tradition were Rom 1 and 1 Cor 6:9. This shift introduced a new interiority to the sin of Sodom. Whereas earlier interpretations emphasized the foreignness of the biblical sodomites, the therapeutic turn of the mid-twentieth-century located homosexuality—at least potentially—within everyday Christianity. Biblical scholar Dale B. Martin has discussed this shift toward interiority as a peculiarly modern understanding of Rom 1: “What for Paul functioned as a sign of the boundary separating idolatrous civilization from monotheistic faith,” Martin (2006, 64) writes, became “a symptom par excellence of what is wrong with ‘all of us.’” Whereas sodomites were distant enemies of the faith, homosexual perversion threatened Christianity from within.

The RSV and accompanying commentaries, through the labors of mid-twentieth-century Bible scholars, generated a new antihomosexual biblical literalism. The interpretive strategies of historical criticism embedded a distantly modern interpretive tradition into the text as a faithful repli-

cation of original meaning. This process also effectively disappeared the earlier perceptions of these passages as erroneous translations or inaccurate interpretations. These interpretive changes pared down the capacious forms of deviance signified by the figures of “sodomites,” “effeminate,” and “abusers of self with mankind” and retrofitted these figures into a modern therapeutic framework as simple anachronisms for homosexuality. Thus a neologism that was not even a century old—and that had only recently appeared in theological commentaries—fit so smoothly into the grooves of older biblical prohibitions that it seemed as if it had been there all along.

The Antigay Tradition

This new tradition also influenced Protestant conservatives. There was, however, nothing inevitable about this influence; conservative Protestants initially resisted both the RSV and the therapeutic paradigm for sexuality. It was not until the mid-1970s that conservative Protestants began to write and reflect at length on the biblical teaching about homosexuality. Evangelical and conservative Protestants worked to adopt and adapt the therapeutic views of sexuality first circulated by their liberal counterparts into a framework that eschewed their liberal counterparts’ deliberate adaptations of secular forms of knowledge. What conservatives embraced as biblical (rather than secular) truth, however, had been effectively christened by a previous generation of Protestant liberals. The Bible’s plain word on homosexuality proceeded from a newly implanted therapeutic tongue.

Conservative attachment to biblical authority was key to a process of authorizing change in the supposedly bedrock text. Critical to the process of consolidating a new orthodoxy was the 1978 publication of the NIV. This Bible translation was the evangelical answer to the liberal RSV, and it quickly surpassed the KJV as America’s bestselling Bible. The RSV was the first Bible to use the term *homosexuals* in the plain text—in a New Testament passage in 1 Corinthians. The RSV also excised some sodomites from the plain text as well. The KJV has several Old Testament passages that referenced “sodomites” as ancient pagan idolaters. The new translation changed them to “cult prostitutes.” These changes tracked along a therapeutic logic, which narrowed the meanings of sodomy to homosexual behavior and thus sloughed off the previously attached meanings of idolatry. When the evangelical translators made their own choices for the NIV, they challenged a number of the RSV precedents, but they adopted this particular set of textual interpretations. In these translation changes,

evangelicals belatedly followed liberals' modern therapeutic paradigm by reconfiguring an older sodomy tradition into an emergent homosexual-ity tradition. Thus the NIV translation worked to ratify and authorize a new antihomosexual tradition. Translators did not only change the Bible's meanings; they changed the wording to make plain newly understood meanings. The debate over whether a modern notion of a sexual orientation should moderate the Bible's plain prohibitions against homosexual acts obscured the more fundamental changes in modern Bibles. The seemingly plain tradition of homosexual prohibition was itself a product of earlier interpretive changes that through the process of translation became embedded into the words of the text.

The direct impetus to explicitly stake out this orthodoxy was not a secular movement for gay rights but the heterodox interpretations within the ranks of conservative Protestants. Leading conservatives were concerned about pro-gay Christian teachings that were gaining influence through the 1970s. The United Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, a gay-welcoming fellowship, voiced a thoroughly biblicist message of gay acceptance (Perry 1972). At the same time, a small but vocal movement for gay and lesbian acceptance also began to emerge within evangelical institutions (Gasaway 2014). This group included Ralph Blair, who led the organizing efforts for Evangelicals Concerned, the affinity group for gay evangelicals founded in 1975 (see Blair 1977). It also included Virginia Ramey Mollenkott and Letha Scanzoni's (1978) best-selling pro-gay treatise, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* Both respected evangelical Christian authors, Scanzoni and Mollenkott made an argument that even critics acknowledged took biblical authority seriously. The first systematic writing by conservative Protestants on the biblical condemnation of homosexuality was a defensive response to previous pro-gay Christian arguments (Lindsell 1973; Bockmühl 1973; Kinlaw 1976; Lovelace 1978; Kirk 1978).

These developments were important because they showed the covert ways that the interpreted meanings of the Bible changed over time, even for conservatives who strongly insisted upon biblical authority. What conservatives defended as tradition was in many ways a reanimated version of liberal therapeutic orthodoxy, which underscored the binding meanings of the Bible's condemnation against homosexual acts. Anti-homosexual conservatives hewed closely to what they saw as the plain evidence of biblical authority. Liberals emphasized historical-critical methods that cultivated a critical distance between the reader and the perceived meanings of Scripture. Through this deliberate attention to

interpretation, liberals challenged and reinterpreted seemingly plain Bible prohibitions on the grounds that they should be seen not as timeless rules but as contextual practices. In contrast, those who professed an attachment to the plain or literal meanings of the Bible accused their opponents of arguing away plain meanings that conveyed the Bible's unchanging authority.

The late twentieth-century explosion of new Bible products also further expanded and cultivated readers' connections to those newly plain meanings. Conservative Protestant publishing companies offered an expanding array of what one religion scholar calls the "culturally relevant Bible" (Gutjahr 2008, 326). Glossy covers, attractive images, and magazine-like styles were important to the consumer packaging of new translations, paraphrase editions, and Bible study tools. They offered the Bible as a lifestyle product with to-the-minute wisdom for everyday choices. These Bible products illustrate a second important aspect to conservative Christian practices of literalism that were important to the practice of this new antigay tradition. In addition to avowed fidelity to biblical authority, the practice of literalism also conveyed a personal and affective relationship to the text and its divine author—the Bible not only speaks authoritatively; it speaks *to me* (Malley 2004). Indeed, the format of late twentieth-century Bible products actively cultivated this sense of closeness. Formats that elicited readers' personal engagement with the text also gave material meaning to the repeated injunction to "hide God's word in your heart." The Bible's meanings were not an external authority but an interiorized truth. The personal attachment to the Bible's meanings served as a mechanism for the production of a distinctive sexual self. When evangelicals spoke of the ways that biblical authority marked out a distinct practice of sexual behavior—sexual abstinence, heterosexuality, and marital fidelity—they were not speaking of a rote performance of external rules; they were referring, rather, to living out a deeply embedded sense of self. The political rhetoric of "defending moral values" might communicate to outsiders an adherence to external rules and authorities; for the born again, however, the affective personal life of faith was about remaining authentic to an interior truth.

Conclusion

This history of the straight Word is not only important for understanding Christianity, but it also helps to illuminate the durable equation of

heteronormativity with religion writ large. In the late twentieth-century debates over homosexuality, sexual identity and biblical orthodoxy seemed to proceed from opposing sources of truth. Gay and lesbian identities are modern and secular; the Bible is ancient and religious. This patent truth stood as such, however, because of the ways that Americans of various faith traditions—and none at all—perceived the Bible’s newly implanted antihomosexual tradition as an accurate map of the past. What “the Bible says” about sexuality has circulated well outside the fold of believing Christians. Indeed, many non-Christians would aver that Scripture *does* plainly forbid homosexuality. These nonbelievers might regard the Scriptural condemnation as a fact—even if the significance they take away from that fact is that religion is homophobic. Modern Bibles, that is, are often read and interpreted as neutral historical evidence about religion writ large, as if modern English translations can account for the long and variable past of a monolithic Judeo-Christian tradition. Such influence suggests a further reason for inquiring into the sexual history of modern Bibles. Not only have they been shaped by modern medical constructions of sexuality, but they have also reinforced and naturalized these new ways of thinking about sexuality by projecting them—via new translations and interpretations—into the ancient past. Moreover, because these modern Bibles have been signified generically as *the* Bible (rather than *a* Bible or a particular Protestant translation), these practices of translation and interpretation have also played an important role in constructing a religious past assumed to be shared, monolithic, and heteronormative.

This felt sense of the past, this essay suggests, is a specter of twentieth-century Protestant biblicism, which continues to pervade civil law and public discourse as the rhetorical touchstone for what historian Mark Noll (2011, 72) calls a “biblical civil religion.” Indeed, Noll’s observation about the nineteenth-century debates over biblical teachings about slavery seems to hold continued relevance for today’s debates over sexuality. Not only did both sides “read the same Bible,” Noll (1998, 43) argues, but “they also read the Bible *in the same way*.” The Bible’s plain meaning continues to haunt the supposedly religion-free zone of the secular. Nowhere is this ghost more pervasive than in the ideology of *sexularism*, a neologism coined by Joan Wallach Scott (2009, 1–2) to name “the elision of the secular and the sexually liberated—their assumed synonymy.” Protestant biblicism, as a felt sense of the past, powerfully underpins all sides of public debates over sex.

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